

Called to Live
Matthew 4: 12-23

"Follow me." Two words, only two words but ones that shape our faith. We do not simply believe; *we follow*. That is not an act that is as simple as it sounds. Back in the day one of our favorite school recess activities was 'Follow the leader.' One person took the position of leader and guided followers through trails, trials, and all sort of maneuvers. Majestic oak trees dotted the playground of my elementary school providing the perfect setting for climbing and exploring. One by one we would follow the leader, make our way up the massive trunks, scurry across the branches, and jump down on the other side, moving on to the next challenge. Winners and other favored ones were those who closely followed the leader - and the rules. Rebels were discouraged with the admonition, "Follow the leader!" It was easy, no decisions to make, nothing that would even give us pause. Just follow.

Not too many years later, though, the dynamics of following became a bit confusing for me. One Friday I begged my parents to let me take the car that night so I could do what it seemed everyone else was doing - go to Galveston. Now, the island is long and narrow. At its east end the seawall runs at a slant on the land side of the main road. If you get the right combination of angle and acceleration, you can actually drive sideways and perhaps even make your way to the walk on the top of the wall! Admittedly, with the really long and low cars of the era, balance could be an issue. Somehow my father had discovered this feat of coordination and equilibrium was part of the Friday night teen festivities and, for some reason, did not want his car - or his daughter - to be part of it. Good thing he never learned about the drag races on the beach! As we stood glaring at one another, he said, "Would you follow someone to the end of the pier and jump off just because everyone else did? Think, Melodie Ann, think!" So now I wasn't supposed to follow? This following is now appearing more complicated. But Jesus quite clearly said, "Follow me." With those words his ministry began. With those words our lives are defined for all time. Now it is up to us to figure out what it means to follow.

The call Jesus offered his disciples is one we know well. The picture it creates is romantic and alluring. Simon, Andrew, James, and John drop everything and leave their lives as they had always known them to walk into the sunset with Jesus. We admire their courage, their lack of hesitation, their deep and passionate commitment. Yet they *abandoned* their livelihood, their family, all they owned! They left poor Zebedee standing there holding a half-mended net wondering how he was going to handle the boats without his sons. Unspoken but no doubt affected by their brash actions were their wives, their children, people who depended on them. Were they inspired, or were they irresponsible?

Found in all four gospels, the call of the disciples is a bit different in each one. In John it is 'come and see'; in the other three 'follow and fish'. In each of them, the call is a brief but not-so-simple invitation with an equally terse yet even more complicated response. Nothing at all like childhood games of 'follow the leader'. Nor was it as self-centered as seeking the thrill of trying to drive at an impossible pitch. The call still rings out today but has gone far beyond actions as straightforward as dropping our nets, forgetting the past, and following the leader. The disciples call - and our call - are ones required full investment of self - body, mind, and soul. Continually unfolding, call takes on new and unexpected dimensions, leads us places we never envisioned, causing us to do the unexpected, creating out of our lives an existence we could not have imagined. We might not be fishing on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, but the call is still there. The words hang in the air around us, "Follow me."

Our call is who we are; it's what we do; it's how we live. When those first disciples left their boats to follow Jesus, it was to a life of movement and relationship. Setting the example for what would become the call on their lives, Jesus "went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people."¹ A call to action, a call to live in a most intentional, thoughtful way.

¹ Matthew 4: 23 NRSV

As the Church call is the reason we are here, the reason for our being. Theologian Frederick Buechner wrote that "the place God calls you is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."² Jesus and his disciples went out into a hungry world. The people wanted to learn, so he taught. Throughout the gospels Jesus served as teacher - in synagogues, large crowds such as at the feeding of the 5000, intimate groups such as him and his disciples. Jesus connected the faith with which many of them were intimately familiar and welded it to the actualities of living. He healed on the Sabbath, because he saw someone hurting. He met people on the beach, on the road, on a hillside, in homes - wherever he was needed. He took a very complicated religious/legal system and distilled it into two laws - Love God, love neighbor as self. He explained his teachings with stories based on their own realities so they could see for themselves that their faith was not a rule book to follow but a life to live.

The people he encountered were discouraged and frightened, so he brought hope and purpose. To the poor, the sick, the disabled, to children, to women, to people who were different and unacceptable, Jesus opened wide his arms and loved them, treasuring each of them as God's own. "Truly, I tell you, whatever you do to the least of these who are my family, you did it to me."³ They were broken and hurting, so he showed them the path to wholeness. A woman of Samaria had multiple marriages and was now in a relationship that many considered sinful. Yet Jesus offered her living water and a way to begin life with fresh vision, with acceptance, with love. In responding to the call, Jesus and the disciples gave wholeness and grace to the world and found a joy and peace that continues to take root in our very souls.

Our world is just as hungry, perhaps even more so. In unprecedented ways the Church, and we as individuals, need to speak the truth of God's love and justice for all. In a world that encourages blind following, our call to follow God must be intentional and well informed stating 'this is why we do what we do'. It is a call that, in the manner of Jesus, is focused on those who

² Frederick Buechner. *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*. Harper and Row. 1975.

³ Matthew 25: 40 NRSV

are the weakest among us, those who cannot defend themselves, those who are forgotten. Call is not about us; call is not about converting; call is serving. In being followers of Jesus we find opportunity - opportunity to transform ourselves into the best of humanity, opportunity to transform the world into the kingdom of God. When viewed through the lens of call, times such as ours, which are dominated by nervousness, tension, and anxiety, become instead beacons of such opportunity. "It is a time for faith to flourish, to be true to our callings and missions, to protect the poor and vulnerable, to evangelize about the genuine meaning of faith, and to lead by example with the values that makes us most human, as God intended."⁴ That is what we have before us in our call - a time for faith to flourish (*a phrase unashamedly borrowed from Jim Wallis*).

At its very heart our call is always, always centered in Jesus Christ, in his teachings, in his message, in his mission. While our call unites us all, our call also celebrates the beautiful diversity that is the sea of humanity. And our call looks forward to God's tomorrow, one that we know is certain and firm, a promise that will be fulfilled. As a congregation those are the questions we ask ourselves:

- Is what we want to do, who we want to be, grounded in the gospel that cares for others, especially those who are oppressed, vulnerable, hurting?
- Can we stand as one, even and maybe even especially knowing, that vast differences surround us?
- Does this keep us locked in the bogs of the past, or does it point beyond ourselves to tomorrow?

Regardless of who is in the White House or which political party has more power, our call remains the same. Changes wake us up, reminding us that we have lessons to teach, people to

⁴ Jim Wallis. "Now Is a Time for Faith to Flourish." www.sojournal.net/articles/now-time-faith-flourish. January 19, 2017.

love and serve, ways to grow ourselves into a community of grace and justice. For that I am grateful, because we have been shocked from our complacency.

We have much work ahead of us - not because of the election but because we are people of God, people with a purpose in life, people with a call. Knowing the needs are many, we find our reason for being in "an urgency born of hope."⁵ No doubt our call can take us out of where we are comfortable, leading us even to risk and danger. But it has always been that way, because the Church was created to stand in opposition to culture to ensure that those most at risk to the whims of power are protected and nurtured and that God's merciful and loving justice will prevail. Let's make our call one that matters, one that makes the world a better and more grace-full place in which to live. As we continue to follow and to learn what our own call is as individuals and as a congregation, it is my hope and prayer that we ask ourselves those questions. Is this about Jesus? Does this unite as one in God? Does this welcome the diversity of God's creation? Does this lead us forward?

One more thing about call - it is for all of us, each one of us. Jesus' call went, not just to the disciples, but to everyone who came to him. 'Follow me' to the lost, to the forgotten, to the poor, to the sick. 'Follow me' to children, to women, to non-Jews, even to the Romans. Their responses all wove together to create the Church we are now. Just as the disciples lived out their calls differently, so do we. We find call in our passions, in what makes our hearts sing. We make quite a tapestry of color, texture, and shape when our calls come together. That is as it should be. That is as we were created to be. We are called - called to live.

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⁵ *The Confession of 1967. Book of Confessions. The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.): Part II.* Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly.